

Malta's relations with Romania in the last two decades of the Cold War: Foreign policy and Maltese domestic politics

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Abstract: *In the 1970s Malta's foreign policy was extended towards Eastern countries. At that time Romania was not on good terms with Warsaw Pact countries. Malta, on the other hand, was taking a determined stance towards a non-aligned policy and during the decade it undertook serious global initiatives to secure peace and stability in the Mediterranean. The two countries found common ground, mainly on peace and security in the Balkans and the Mediterranean. The relations between Valletta and Bucharest made a breakthrough in the first half of the 1980s when both countries were exchanging delegations continuously, however Malta's positive rapport with Romania was not well received by the opposition party in Malta. This paper aims to analyse the relations between Malta and Romania in the last two decades of the Cold War by highlighting the various themes which characterised their bilateral relations. This research is mainly based on primary sources since research of this kind was never done before.*

Keywords: Ceaușescu, Malta, Mintoff, Romania

A brief understanding of Malta's foreign policy in the 1970s and the 1980s

The relations between Malta and Romania in the midst of the Cold War period must be understood in a context of the global setting at that time. Both countries had different political stages of development. To start with, it is not by accident that this paper will analyse the bilateral relations between the two countries in the last twenty years of the Cold War (1971- 1991).

In 1971, the Malta Labour Party (MLP), led by Dominic Mintoff, won its first general election after Malta gained its independence in 1964. Many analysts

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and opinion makers hold the idea that the aftermath of the 1971 elections changed Malta's path in a variety of sectors, including foreign policy. Malta's foreign policy opened its doors to new talks and cooperation with the 'East'. Mintoff and the rest of the administration of the Labour Party which was in government affirmed a 360-degree approach in foreign politics. It was a period when Malta and Romania initiated serious talks on a political level.

The 1971 electoral manifesto of the MLP heralded big changes in Maltese society, economy and foreign policy. Mintoff wanted Malta to be neutral and its neutrality was gradually recognised by most countries of the world. After his victory in 1971 Mintoff started working to remove the NATO headquarters, which have been operational in Malta since 1953. The admiral Commander of the Allied forces in the Mediterranean, Gino Birindelli was considered as a *persona non grata* by Prime Minister Mintoff, and in a matter of months, NATO left Malta.

The then Prime Minister Mintoff also re-negotiated the defence treaty Malta had with Great Britain and it was extended for another seven years. The British bases eventually closed down on 31 March 1979. To accusations that Malta was tilting towards the Soviet bloc, Mintoff declared in Parliament: "We want neither the Americans, nor the Russians, is this difficult to understand?"¹

Mintoff's Mediterranean doctrine was put at the centre of world politics. He believed that the Mediterranean should be given more prominence in global discussions. During the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in 1975, Dr. Anton Buttigieg, the Maltese representative, used his veto in order to draw more attention on the Mediterranean and the need for peace and cooperation between European and Arab countries of North Africa and the Middle East.

At home, Malta's foreign policy was heavily criticised by the opposition led by the Nationalist Party (PN). The party repeatedly confessed that the openings towards Eastern Europe and China were paving the way for Communist infiltration in Malta. The PN won the 1987 elections and it is often assumed that Malta's foreign policy route changed its direction.

Therefore, for the purpose of this paper to analyse Malta's relations with Romania, the early 1990s were chosen for two main reasons. As previously mentioned, the 1987 election was won by the PN led by Dr Eddie Fenech Adami.

¹ Parliamentary debate (Malta), 31 March 1978.

In this way, we can analyse if Malta really changed its path in foreign policy. Secondly, in the late 1980s Ceaușescu's regime in Romania was toppled by the Romanian revolution. For the latter we will see if the events that were happening in Romania had an impact on Malta's relations.

During the course of these twenty years under analysis the relations between Malta and Romania were not only political in nature, but they also tackled the economic and cultural aspects. This research also intends to discuss how the relations between the two countries affected the Maltese political scene.

An introduction to Malta's relations with Romania

Diplomatic relations between Malta and Romania were established in 1968 when a Romanian delegation went to Malta and met government officials and the Chamber of Commerce. The Romanian delegation was interested in opening industrial plants on the island. After this visit there were delegation exchanges and agreements between the two countries. Relations between Malta and Romania were strengthened during the 1970s and 1980s, as the two countries struck common ground in their approach to many issues, such as disarmament and peace, Industry, tourism, and economic cooperation. Maltese President Agatha Barbara was instrumental in developing contacts with Romanian top officials.

Of course, during these 20 years there were changes in Malta's foreign policy towards Romania. The new Maltese government of 1987 appeared to modify its policy. Yet, at no point relations switched to being negative. It was just that Maltese politicians were adapting to political changes in Romania with a view to ensuring peace and stability in the region.

Political relations

A few months after Mintoff's electoral victory in 1971, a numerous Romanian delegation went to Malta to discuss projects related to agriculture, tourism and the overall strengthening of relations between the two countries. It consisted of Dr. Almasar Bugor, minister for Mines, Petroleum and Geology, the director-general of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs Vasile Manolescu, other Romanian officials and journalists. The delegation met with the minister of

Commerce, Agriculture, Industry and Tourism, Dr. J. Micallef Stafrace.² Although the talks looked promising, it would take another decade before Malta and Romania started signing concrete agreements and implementing serious projects. However, Mintoff's visit to Romania in November 1971 was an important first step.

At that time Mintoff left Malta for a two-week tour in Eastern Europe which took him to Romania, Poland and Yugoslavia. The visit in Romania was important, as with the help of the Romanian government Mintoff would visit the People's Republic of China in April 1972, becoming him the first West European prime minister to visit that country.

Mintoff had talks with his Romanian counterpart, Gheorghe Maurer. While acknowledging that the system of government was different in the two countries, Mintoff was certain of similarities between the two peoples, since they were both eager to work for their country, and also to ensure that any global giant would not impose its wishes on small countries.³ Mintoff was also received by Romanian president Nicolae Ceaușescu. He visited industrial plants in Pitești.

More than ten years later, Ceaușescu reciprocated with a two day visit in Malta between 18 and 19 October 1983. Some months earlier, after Malta had submitted proposals to the Madrid conference on security and cooperation in Europe, Ceaușescu had sent a special envoy to discuss these issues with the Maltese government

The Romanian president visited the Malta dry docks and then had long talks with Mintoff at Castille.⁴ Ceaușescu was also invited to dinner at the president's palace. There, during her speech, the Maltese president put emphasis on the then escalating international crisis. She warned that peace and security would be seriously imperilled unless practical measures to ease tensions were not adopted. The Maltese president commented Romania's efforts for a nuclear free zone in the Balkans, just like Malta was doing in the Mediterranean. Barbara stated that Malta and Romania had closely cooperated in the Madrid Conference and hoped that achievements at the political level should be matched by similar progress on the economic, industrial and commercial fields.

² *L-orizzont*, 13 October 1971

³ *L-orizzont*, 5 November 1971.

⁴ Auberge de Castille: The office of the prime minister in Valletta.

Ceaușescu replied that his country supported Malta's initiatives to defuse tensions in the Mediterranean. Malta and Romania were in agreement not only on bilateral terms but also on international issues, he said. He linked Malta's independence to the proclamation of a Republic and the ousting of foreign military bases from the island. The Romanian president also agreed that Malta and Romania should seek closer cooperation in the sectors of the economy, industry and commerce.

With regard to the international situation, Malta and Romania agreed that all 'progressive forces' should work with determination to end the descent to war, and assure peace and détente among all peoples. More specifically, the two sides agreed on nuclear disarmament in the Mediterranean. The joint communiqué concluded that Malta and Romania would work together on international issues in the United Nations and the 77-member non-aligned movement.⁵ During this visit, Ceaușescu's wife, Elena, was given an 'Onoris Causa' from the University of Malta in Engineering.

The 1983 Ceaușescu visit in Malta was not welcomed by the editorial of *The Times* (Malta). On the day of the arrival of the Romanian President in Malta, the editorial claimed that Ceaușescu created a form of Communism that was suitable only for his country. Despite his efforts to stay away from the Kremlin, the editorial reminded that he was still a Communist, and formed part of the Warsaw Pact and the COMECON. The editorial mentioned as well that the economic links between Malta and Romania were weak, and foresaw that economic cooperation was impossible as Romania was not a country with much economic stability. The Romanian President was mentioned for his negative financial policies which had caused his people to emigrate. On the occasion of his visit in Malta, *The Times* hoped that Ceaușescu would learn the Maltese Christian way of life which represented its Western values, while those welcoming him in Malta should not forget about the situation in Romania.⁶

In late April 1984 a delegation from the Romanian Communist Party headed by the secretary of its central committee Ion Coman visited Malta. It met Labour Party and General Workers' Union (GWU) officials. Its members were also received by President Barbara.⁷ Meeting with GWU officials, Coman pointed

⁵ *L-orizzont*, 20 October 1983

⁶ *The Times*, 18 October 1981

⁷ *Government press release*, No 741, (27 April 1984)

out similarities of the history of the two countries. Romania, he said, was under foreign rule for 200 years, and it was only 40 years ago that the Romanian people had managed to achieve social revolution and freedom under Communist Party direction. He mentioned that ca. six million Romanians were enrolled in workers' unions. He also stated that Romanian unions have played a major role in promoting his country's policy of peace.

Two days later the Romanian delegation met Labour Party officials and the two sides agreed collaboration between their youth and women's sections. Also, they acknowledged that Ceaușescu's visit in Malta was a huge step towards strengthening bilateral relations. Coman concluded that the Maltese people wished for further cooperation with his country.⁸

Between 5 and 10 July 1985, the president of the Republic of Malta paid a state visit to Romania. The Maltese delegation visited institutions of arts and culture in Bucharest, Pitesti and Constanta. Accompanying the Maltese president, Foreign Minister Dr Alex Sceberras Trigona had a meeting with his Romanian counterpart, Ștefan Andrei.

At the state banquet, the two presidents spoke warmly about the positive relations between the two countries, highlighting Ceaușescu's visit in 1983. Talks during the Maltese president's visit were characterised by the discourse on world peace and security. Ceaușescu and Barbara agreed that the arms race must stop in order to facilitate the process of disarmament, especially in the nuclear field. They also agreed that the Mediterranean should be a region completely free from Nuclear weapons. Both mentioned that small states also contribute to the international economic order, and that they should be at the forefront of promoting solutions for the great problems that humanity was facing.

On the occasion of the World Youth Year, the Romanian Youth minister Nicu Ceaușescu visited Malta in July 1985 and addressed the conference organised by the Mediterranean Youth Camp. He also visited an international English language school and the Malta Trade Fair. Ceaușescu met the minister for Foreign Affairs and members from the Labour Party youth section.⁹ In an interview before he left Malta, he said that he expected further cooperation on youth policy, especially in the fields of culture, politics, and scientific research.¹⁰

⁸ *L-orizzont*, 1 May 1984

⁹ *L-orizzont*, 12 July 1985

¹⁰ *L-orizzont*, 15 July 1985

In February 1986, Dr Sceberras Trigona announced that an air services agreement between Malta and Romania was being concluded and sought parliamentary approval.¹¹ This was part of the Maltese government's effort to establish a network of air services from Malta to other parts of Europe.¹² However, the agreement would be eventually signed in November 1990 (When the PN was in government) by PN parliamentary secretary for transport and communications Francis Zammit Dimech and the Romanian undersecretary of state responsible for civil aviation Dumitru Dorin Prunariu.

Ceaușescu's dictatorship came to an end on 22 December 1989, as a result of what became known as the Romanian revolution. The Maltese PN government condemned the massacre of Romanian protesters on the eve of the revolution. The PN spokesman emphasised that human rights and dignity should be respected and reminded the Romanian authorities that what was happening in Eastern Europe was due to people's anger at corruption and lack of democracy.¹³

On 26 December, the Maltese government recognised the new Romanian government formed by the National Salvation Front which nominated Ion Iliescu as the country's president and Petre Roman as prime minister. On the same day the parliamentary secretary for Health announced that Malta was already sending the Romanian people medical supplies. The government was also in touch with Caritas Malta, the International Red Cross and the World Health Organisation in order to better determine how Malta could be of help to the Romanian people in their hour of need.¹⁴

Meanwhile the PN was supporting the Maltese bishops' appeal of help for the Romanian people through Caritas Malta. The Maltese Curia also urged the Maltese to pray for the Romanian people, and if need be to offer money or other material help.¹⁵

A few days later it was announced that the fund to help Romanian victims had collected Lm 15,000 in three days.¹⁶ After the New Year, the *Times* reported that president Tabone had contributed \$6,000. The sum was presented to Maurice Lubrano, the Maltese ambassador to Eastern European countries.

¹¹ *The Times*, 20 February 1986

¹² *Government press release*, No 2718, (22 November 1990)

¹³ *In-nazzjon tagħna*, 22 December 1989

¹⁴ *Government press release*, No 3306, (26 December 1989)

¹⁵ *In-nazzjon tagħna*, 27 December 1989

¹⁶ Circa €33,000

At the time of the Romanian revolution, both major political parties in Malta took the opportunity to mudsling each other on account of their respective governments' relations with Romania's former dictator, Ceauşescu. The Sunday PN newspaper *Il-mument* on 24 December 1989 reported the fact that neither the MLP, nor the GWU newspaper *L-orizzont* reported anything on how things were unfolding in Romania. The article mentioned that the news of the fall of Communism in Romania was a global issue, and major media establishments were reporting minute by minute from Bucharest. Apart from that, the article commented that most probably the newspaper *L-orizzont* was embarrassed to display its past relationship with the communist dictator Ceauşescu, or else they were sorry that they lost their biggest friend.¹⁷

The PN media continued reporting updates of the Romanian revolution and the MLP's past with Ceauşescu. A photo of Ceauşescu's visit when he met Mintoff and President Barbara in Malta in 1983 was published on the front page of *In-Nazzjon tagħna* on 27 December 1989. An article was also published on the front page and pointed out that the MLP was embarrassed of its past, and this is why it felt ashamed when other local newspapers mentioned the MLP's friendship with Ceauşescu. The article reminded that in 1983, when Ceauşescu visited Malta, the GWU newspaper *L-orizzont* welcomed him wholeheartedly. It also deemed the friendship between Malta and Romania 'intimate'. The PN newspaper front page article gave prominence as well to the fact that in 1983 the Maltese Socialists were praising and almost portrayed the Romanian President as a deity, while the PN warned of the dangers of Malta's relations with Ceauşescu. The article referred to an article written by PN exponent Michael Falzon at the time of Ceauşescu's visit in 1983 when he warned about the evils of the Romanian dictator and outlined some problems which Romania faced at that time including the fact that Romanian citizens were repressed, and that corruption prevailed in Romanian institutions.¹⁸

Despite the barrage of criticism from the PN, the MLP showed solidarity with the Romanian people during their revolution. The MLP Deputy leader Joe Brincat, while addressing a party activity, stressed the fact that the PN was misled when it said that the MLP was neglecting the Romanian revolution. He added that

¹⁷ *Il-mument*, 24 December 1989

¹⁸ *In-Nazzjon tagħna*, 27 December 1989

the MLP always believed in the strength of the people along with their freedoms and sovereignty.¹⁹

The MLP-Ceaușescu demonization process continued with yet another front page article on *In-Nazzjon tagħna* two days later. This time the PN newspaper reported that if the MLP got re-elected in 1987, the Labour administration would have brought over Ceaușescu again in Malta. The article reveals a communique issued in Bucharest in 1985 between President Barbara and Ceaușescu. In the communique it was mentioned that Barbara invited Mr & Mrs Ceaușescu to visit Malta and that they had accepted the invitation. The date for their visit was going to be fixed by diplomatic procedures. Apart from the critique towards the MLP, the article also mentioned that when Ceaușescu visited Malta in 1983 General Vlad was accompanying him. The Romanian general happened to be the head of Ceaușescu's security, and was lately killing innocent civilians in the course of the Romanian revolution.²⁰

A day later, *L-orizzont* reported some aspects of Romanian relations with the PN which were revealed during a Labour Party activity. An activity was held when a German delegation from the SPD²¹ was in Malta for a visit. During the activity, Leo Brincat said that although the PN was trying to portray the MLP as a Stalinist Party because it had good relations with Ceaușescu; the Nationalists should not forget who was invited during their independence celebrations. He pointed out that while other countries were sending their ambassadors, Romania had sent its Foreign minister, Aurel Duma. Brincat added that it was not true that the West was neglecting Romania, and claimed that the USA had trading relations with Romania.²²

The Labour Party and GWU media mentioned that the relations between Malta and Romania started under a PN administration way back in 1968 and accused the PN of defaming the MLP in the light of the recent events. The article on *L-orizzont* mentioned that in 1968, *the Observer* reported that the two countries were interested in building stronger relations. Also at that time the PN together with their Western friends were deeming Romania a hero since it went against the Soviet Union. The article concluded that it was in the interest of the PN

¹⁹ *L-orizzont*, 28 December 1989

²⁰ *In-Nazzjon tagħna*, 29 December 1989

²¹ The German Socialist Party

²² *L-orizzont*, 30 December 1989

propaganda machine not to say the truth, and continue with its mudslinging and lies.²³

Economic relations

In 1983, during Ceaușescu's two-day visit to Malta, the final joint communiqué stated that the two sides reaffirmed that closer economic cooperation should strengthen the existing collaboration between the two countries. They agreed that more effort was needed between their enterprises, and participation in fairs and exhibitions in their countries. They also agreed to facilitate bilateral cooperation in construction, modernisation of industrial plants and the opening of new ones.²⁴

A Romanian delegation visited Malta in June 1984 as part of a mixed commission. Headed by the director general of the Ministry of Tourism, it met Malta's Tourism minister Joe Grima. They discussed the possibility of opening a health centre for tourists that would be operated by Romanians. They also discussed on how tourists were going to be increased in both countries.²⁵

A month later, the Labour Party International secretary Leo Brincat went to Romania where he met with Ceaușescu and Coman. During his visit, possibilities for Maltese exports to Romania, tourism and industrial cooperation were discussed with deputy minister of Foreign Commerce, Stanciu. Brincat attended the festivities for the 40th anniversary of Romania's 'freedom from fascist and imperialist forces', and also an extraordinary plenary session of the Romanian Communist Party. He also gave an interview to Romanian television.²⁶

During President Barbara's state visit in July 1985, Ceaușescu commented positively the session of the Romanian-Maltese mixed commission for trade exchange and economic, industrial and technological cooperation which had taken place in May of the same year. In this session the two countries agreed on cooperation on technical assistance for oil exploration in Malta. Ceaușescu also expressed his interest in further development in air and sea transport between the two countries.²⁷

²³ *L-orizzont*, 31 December 1989

²⁴ *L-orizzont*, 20 October 1983

²⁵ *L-orizzont*, 30 June 1984

²⁶ *L-orizzont*, 25 August 1984

²⁷ *Malta- Romania joint communique*, (10 July 1985)

Cultural relations

Apparently, Nicu Ceaușescu's hopes, during his visit in July 1985, for closer cooperation on cultural matters did not translate into action. Although the subject was mentioned whenever leaders of both countries met, there was no major breakthrough in cultural relations. During the period under discussion it seems that there was no sustained activity related to culture. If there had been any progress in this sector, it was minimal. Both countries should have worked harder to promote cultural contact between their people. It is clear that the two governments, while seeking to develop political relations, failed to give much importance to the economy and totally neglected the cultural field.

The issue of child adoption from Romania

Romania was one of the options whereby Maltese couples could adopt a child. After the Romanian revolution and the severe economic hardships caused by the collapse of the command economy, many Maltese thought that more Romanian children would be up for adoption. Aware of the pitfalls ahead, the Maltese government was involved at an early stage and contacted Bucharest. The Romanian authorities, however, were slow to respond.²⁸

Nonetheless, by early 1991 several Romanian babies found their way to Maltese families. At that point, the minister for Social Policy, Dr. Louis Galea, issued a statement of caution. Romania, he stated, did not have a regulatory agency on adoption and therefore it was impossible for the Maltese government to negotiate officially. Romanian courts only gave authorisation for adoptions once the home study report was done. He said that Maltese couples willing to adopt from Romania had to do so individually. However, he advised couples to take precautions and have the necessary medical tests at hand before adopting as some babies adopted from Romania were found HIV positive. Galea said that the government would assist couples willing to adopt from Romania.²⁹

MLP candidate Dr. George Vella wrote an article on *L-orizzont* dated 2 March 1991. In his article Vella mentioned that it was such a shame that Maltese couples willing to adopt from Romania fell to the corruption practices of

²⁸ *Government press release*, No 120, (17 January 1990)

²⁹ *The Times*, 14 February 1991

Romanian institutions. Worst of all was that the government did not interfere in such matters. Vella also pointed out that it was not fair that couples who were not financially well off had to suffer the injustices of Romanian institutions and the incapability of the Maltese government. He advised that Maltese couples should be protected, and given assurances from trustworthy institutions, and encouraged the government to formulate an adequate policy for adoptions from Romania and guarantees that babies from Romania were healthy.³⁰

In May of that year, a Romanian adoption committee official announced that adoptions from the country would cease until September 1991, pending the enactment of a law which outlawed private adoptions. This would require agreements at the government level in order to ensure control and compliance with international standards. Until May 1991, 112 children had already been adopted from Romania in Malta.³¹

Concluding remarks

During Labour Party rule, Malta and Romania had similar discourses on international issues, e.g. the need to establish peace, security in the Balkans and the Mediterranean, support for disarmament and nuclear free zones. With Romania's help, Malta managed to start building relations with China in 1971-72, at a time when Beijing was not in good terms with Moscow but enjoyed friendly rapports with Bucharest.

Malta's friendship with Romania is reflected in the number of official visits and the direct contact with Romanian president Ceaușescu. Romania acknowledged the importance of Malta as a strategic point in the middle of the Mediterranean and its contribution towards world peace. Bilateral relations were conducted in a friendly and positive atmosphere. High level visits and, especially, tourism led to increased awareness on the cultural as well as the political level.

The divide between the East and West at that time was also evident in the Maltese political discourse. In general, the PN opposition did not welcome the close relations Malta was building with the East. In Post-War history the PN was always aligned with the western values and anti-communism. On the other hand

³⁰ *L-orizzont*, 2 March 1991

³¹ *Il-gens*, 31 May 1991

the MLP believed that Malta should have a 360 degrees foreign policy by obtaining the best from various countries. Most initiatives undertaken by the Labour administration included: establishing the Mediterranean as a region of peace and stability, global disarmament, and also to make Malta less dependent on the British.

There was a change of tone after the PN was elected to government in 1987. Official contacts decreased, and it seemed that the direct contact with Ceaușescu stopped abruptly. However, it must be pointed out that, like its Eastern European counterparts, the Romanian communist regime was in terminal decline and it was reasonable for the new Maltese leadership, which aspired to closer cooperation with the West, to lose interest. During the Romanian revolution and the fall of Ceaușescu, the PN government acted in a constructive manner, by encouraging peace, liberty and contributing to healing the worst effects of a violent regime change.

The Labour government had also acted in an understandable manner during the 1970s and 1980s. The Labour Party's foreign policy was preaching Malta's neutrality and the importance of the Mediterranean region for world peace at a time when the Cold War seemed to be intensifying. The warm relations with Romania, therefore, do not come as a surprise if one considers the political climate of that time.

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